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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000056

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SUBJECT: NEW ZEALAND FOREIGN MINISTER PETERS' VISIT TO FIJI

Classified By: Ambassador Larry M. Dinger per 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. According to New Zealand's High Commissioner to Fiji, the visit of Foreign Minister Winston Peters met all of New Zealand's objectives. Peters delivered messages about the importance of democracy and the rule of law and the need for positive civil-military relations. Both PM Qarase and opposition leader Chaudhry expressed confidence to Peters about winning the upcoming election. Fiji's CEO of Foreign Affairs told us he and Foreign Minister Tavola stressed the importance of engaging with Pacific Island nations in order to counter Chinese moves in the region. They also urged Peters to rethink New Zealand's nuclear policy in order to improve relations with the U.S. Peters reportedly stated that some changes in that policy might be considered. End summary.

¶2. (C) Michael Green, New Zealand High Commissioner to Fiji, told Ambassador and visiting EAP/ANP Director Krawitz that Foreign Minister Winston Peters' visit was highly successful. He was well received everywhere he went in Fiji, and had a good mix of office calls and activities, such as visiting New Zealand-supported aid projects. Peters proved to be effective, said Green, in delivering messages about the importance of democracy, the rule of law and stable civil-military relations. Key meetings included calls on the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Finance (mostly related to aid projects), the Speaker of Parliament, opposition Labor Party leader Chaudhry, and Fiji Military Forces Commander Bainimarama.

Elections

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Qarase told Peters he is anxious to hold the elections early. Qarase was confident of victory, stating that in addition to his support in the indigenous Fijian community, he has considerable support among Indo-Fijian businesspeople and in that community in general. Nevertheless, the PM recognizes that opposition leader Chaudhry is an experienced and wily campaigner. Qarase said he is taking nothing for granted. The main issues Qarase's SDL Party will campaign on are health, education and the alleviation of poverty. The SDL expects to choose many new faces to run for seats in Parliament. There could be as much as a 50% turnover of current SDL MPs.

¶4. (C) Chaudhry told Peters that he, too, is prepared for the election. He noted, with an obvious reference to the 1999 election and the events that followed, that "the problem

is not winning, but keeping the job." Chaudhry said he would focus on economic issues in the campaign, stating the ruling party has failed the country on issues like health, jobs, education, and poverty. Chaudhry had some surprising words of praise for Fiji's electoral commission, stating the office has responded positively to complaints about possible registration and election irregularities he had raised.

Civil-Military Relations

15. (C) In his meeting with Commander Bainimarama, Peters stressed the importance of proper civil-military relations and the need for differences to be resolved via constitutional means. Green said Bainimarama gave every indication he understood the message. Green noted that Peters and Bainimarama know each other well, and had spent considerable time together in Wellington pubs during the "Wellington 7s" rugby tournament a few years back. In interviews with media after the meeting, Bainimarama said he and Peters talked about the military relationship between Fiji and New Zealand and the need to strengthen military ties between Fiji, New Zealand, the United States, Australia, and Papua New Guinea.

Unity Bill

16. (C) Green said the Reconciliation, Unity and Tolerance Bill was not a major subject of discussion during Peters' meetings. Speaker of Parliament Ratu Epeli Nailatikau said the government has handled the Bill very poorly and has been forced to put it on the shelf. Chaudhry said the Bill would not be discussed this parliamentary session. Bainimarama,

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the most vocal critic of the Bill, did not mention it.

Meeting with Foreign Ministry:
Focus on China, NZ's Nuclear Policy

17. (C) Isikeli Matakaitoga, CEO of Foreign Affairs, told the Ambassador and Krawitz that he and Foreign Minister Tavola encouraged Peters to "do something about" New Zealand's nuclear policy in order to improve relations with the United States. Peters responded that New Zealand might consider making some changes to that policy, but did not elaborate.

18. (C) Tavola and Matakaitoga stressed the growing role of China in the region, and said New Zealand and other developed countries needed to work harder to counteract China. Matakaitoga said the impact of dollar diplomacy and other games the PRC and Taiwan have been playing in the region is very destabilizing, especially for the "more susceptible" smaller Pacific states. Frequent changes in government, he continued, are not good for the region, especially in dealing with regional issues like counter-terrorism and money laundering. Tavola and Matakaitoga suggested that the best way to counteract PRC and Taiwan dollar diplomacy is by helping build the economies of the Pacific. One obvious step, he said, would be to open up New Zealand and Australia's labor markets to workers from the Pacific Island states.

19. (C) Comment: Peters' message about the proper role of the military adds to the long roll-call of visitors who have hammered on that theme. As the country heads into election season, another reiteration of the need for democracy and the rule of law is always welcome.

